

Hepatitis B

Fact Sheet

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B (HBV) formerly known, as serum hepatitis is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus. An estimated 140,000 Americans are infected each year. Approximately 1-1.25 million people are chronically infected and are considered to be carriers of the virus.

Who gets hepatitis B?

Anyone can get hepatitis B, but those at greatest risk include:

- Babies born to mothers who are infectious with the hepatitis B virus (including carriers)
- Injection drug users (or persons who share needles);
- Persons in occupations where there is contact with infected blood and other infectious body fluids which includes saliva - (persons who work as health care workers, first responders, etc.);
- Sexually active homosexual and bisexual men;
- Anyone with multiple sex partners;
- Men and women who have a recent diagnosis of another sexually transmitted disease
- Hemodialysis patients;
- Persons who receive unscreened blood products;
- Certain household contacts of an infected person;
- Household contacts and sexual partners of hepatitis B carriers
- Inmates of long-term correctional facilities
- Persons from countries where hepatitis B is widespread (certain areas of Asia and Africa);
- Persons in the United States who are Alaskan Natives or Pacific Islanders.
- Persons receiving tattoos/body piercings.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis B virus can be found in the blood of infected persons; it is also present in lesser amounts in semen, vaginal secretions, amniotic fluid, body fluids containing blood, unfixed tissues and organs, and saliva. Hepatitis B virus is spread through sexual contact (homosexual and heterosexual), needle sharing, needle stick injury, mucous membrane exposure, and direct contact with infected body fluids. Hepatitis B virus is not spread by casual contact.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Many persons with hepatitis B infection have no symptoms at all, or they may be mild and flu-like (i.e.: loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fatigue). Some patients may notice darkened urine (iced-tea colored), light clay colored stools or yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice). A few persons will experience a more severe disease syndrome and may die of overwhelming liver failure.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms, if they appear, may occur as early as 45 days to as long as 180 days following exposure, the average is 60-90 days. The variation in time for onset of symptoms is related in part to the amount of virus transmitted at the time of exposure.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

Since there are several types of viral hepatitis, a blood test is needed to determine which type of hepatitis is present.

For how long is a person able to spread the virus?

The virus can be present in blood and other body fluids several weeks before symptoms appear and generally for several months afterward. About 1 in 10 adults and 3 of 10 children with hepatitis B will go on to become ongoing carriers of the virus for the rest of their lives even when they do not have symptoms. As long as the virus is present, it can be spread to others. Persons with hepatitis B infection should not donate blood, organs or tissues.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There are no special medicines to treat a person with acute hepatitis B disease. Generally, rest and supportive treatment is all that is needed. Carriers of hepatitis B infection may benefit from treatment with a medication called interferon.

What precautions should hepatitis B carriers take?

Hepatitis B carriers should practice good hygiene so that close contacts are not directly exposed to their blood or other body fluids. Carriers must not share razors, toothbrushes or any other object that may become contaminated with blood. In addition, household members, particularly sexual partners, should be immunized with hepatitis B vaccine. Carriers should practice "safe sex"; use barrier precautions, if their partners are not immunized. It is important for carriers to inform their dentists and other health care providers of their carrier state.

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes, a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B has been available since 1982. It is safe, effective and recommended for all newborns, 11-12 year olds and for any person at risk for getting infected (see page 1, "Who gets hepatitis B?"). A special hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) is also available for people who are not vaccinated and are exposed to the virus. If you are exposed to hepatitis B, consult a doctor or your local health department immediately.

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